

BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY

MCC BOSTON

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We are talking about the prophet Elijah. Elijah was afraid and fled for his life, going to Beersheba of Judah. He left his servant there and went further into the desert, until he came to a broom tree and sat beneath it, and prayed for death.

"This is enough, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors. He laid down and fell asleep under the broom tree. But then an angel came to him and ordered him to get up and eat. He looked and there at his head was bowl of porridge and a cup of water. After he ate and drank, he laid down again. But the angel of the Lord came back a second time, touched him, and ordered him "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you." He got up, ate and drank, and strengthened by that food, he walked 30 days and 30 nights..."

The second reading is from Ephesians IV: 30... "Do nothing to sadden the Holy Spirit, with whom you are sealed against the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice of every kind. In place of these be kind to one another, compassionate, mutually forgiving, as God has forgiven you. Be imitators of God, as God's precious children. Follow the way of God, even as Christ loved you, and gave himself for us, as offering to God a gift of pleasing fragrance."

The Gospel lesson is from John 6:41... "At this the Jews began to murmur in protest because he claimed, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." And they kept saying, "Isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph. Do we not know his parents. How can he claim to have come down from heaven." "Stop your murmuring," Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Parent who sent me draws that person. And I will raise you up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'They shall be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard my parent and learned comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Parent, only the One who is from God has seen my Parent. Let me firmly assure you, that the one who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the desert, but they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven. The ones who eat shall never die. I, myself, am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, that one shall live forever. For the bread I give you is my flesh for the life of the world." (Amen.)

Our scripture for the last 2-3 weeks has been centered on bread, on the bread of life, on the feeding of the 5,000, on the feeding of the Hebrew children in the wilderness. There has been this recurring theme of feeding and bread as we go along our walk through life.

Tonight my sermon is called "Bread for the Journey" because we are not fed for nothing. We are fed for a specific reason. We are fed in order that we may take the journey. So, I want to look at the journey, and I want to look at the bread for that journey.

For a long time we have had a picture of the church which has stressed the importance of changing institutions and has tried to ignore the task of changing individuals. It is time for us to recognize that we must focus on both. We cannot change the institution without changing the person. We cannot change the person without the institution changing. We must look at the self and the community in which that self grows.

First, the self: The church must address the birth of new beings, the care of the single one, the decisional center in each of us. But we are not alone, we exist in community. We are all part of the social as we are of ourselves. Someone has seen this journey as a long corridor, and some of us edge down the corridor toward the door at the end, the door of the future, and some see that door as firmly shut -- the future as closed. And so they turn around and retreat and withdraw into nostalgia. They return to the past because the future is frightening. They are the folk who join Archie Bunker in singing, "Those were the days," whatever the days. For some, the days were their heroic 1940's and they will tell you their old war stories ad nauseam. For some, it was their activist 60's, and they, too, will tell you their war stories ad nauseam. For some it is the picture of childhood safety, the church that they belonged to back home, if you will, the "Church in the Wildwood," and they never want to grow up past that.

A second group rushes madly down the hall, believing that the world can be changed instantly. They rush down the hall and crash up against the door, and they say, "Oh, It isn't going to change, and so they retreat to alcohol, to drugs, to mysticism, to whatever is going down that year."

And then there is a third group who make their way down the hall, and see a slip of light under the door, and perceive that the door is slightly ajar, and they know that there is light at the end of

the corridor, because while the door is not wide open, it is not locked or shut fast. Some One has passed this way before, and torn down the "No Exit" sign, and shouldered open the door. Because some can see the light at the end of the corridor, they move forward, they act toward the future. Christian hope liberates us from the fear that sends us backward, downward, or inward. We face ahead and forward, moved on by the word that beckons us to move in hope out of the darkness and into the light. As Christians, we are open to a hope that will change lives and change the community. We do not move blindly. We know, for example, that both we and the church are not perfect.

I was preaching in Rochester last week and one of the things that I pointed out was that there is a difference between liberals and radicals. "Liberals" are always trying to change things for 'those others;' who are trying to give to somebody else from their own feeling of largesse. "I have something I am going to give to these others." Radicals, on the other hand, know that we are all in trouble, and we have all got to get out of it together, or no one is going to get out of it. And so the radical is the one who will try to change the situation by making common cause with other people, not try to hand to others. We are dissatisfied with ourselves, because we are radicals. We are dissatisfied with the world. We are dissatisfied with the church from a radical stance within the church. It is this dissatisfaction that makes us hunger for faith, makes us need change, and be concerned for the future of the church and for society. We turn to the original journey which was taken before us for models for our own journey, and we see in that journey some landmarks. We see Bethlehem, Galilee, Gethsemane, and Calvary. We see Emmaus. Our birth, our lives, our testing, our death and resurrection let us know that the Christ-event does change things. It converts. It turns things around for us. And we want to get the story out that belief in Jesus Christ changes things, because it has changed us. That's the secret. We invite others to join us in passing through the door, to take the journey with us, and we promise them that on the journey that they, too, will be accompanied as we are, and that they, too, will be fed.

Someone has said that Christianity "is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." It is each of us sensing our own hunger, our own need, our own lack within ourselves, our own hunger for something we cannot provide for ourselves, and reaching out for that and when we have found it saying to somebody else, "Hey, I have found the most wonderful thing in the world, and I want to share it with you...Have a piece of my bread." "Have a piece of whatever it is that sustains me on this journey. Share with me the sustenance that I live on. Come with me on a journey following one who has gone before us, and eat of the Living Bread."

Jesus has told us that he is the Living Bread. He is the bread for our journey, for our lives. We need not go through our lives hungering. We need not go through our lives lost. We need not go through our lives empty and searching constantly to be filled by whatever it is that we are looking for instead of something as vital as the Living Bread.

We are all part of the same community. We all know the multitude of things that people search for, look for, and we have talked about them here before. The "Prince or Princess Perfect" that we chase all of our lives, because we are empty and searching. The long nights when we "belly up to the bar" because there isn't any place else where we can go to be filled. The destructive things that we get ourselves into because we don't have any hope that it is going to get better. And yet, there are people among us who know that it is going to get better, who know that there is another answer, who know that there is a better way, and who have been down the road accompanied by someone who says to them, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And why aren't we all following them?

It amazes me that as the days go by, and as the society we are in gets more and more troubled that more and more people are not looking for answers. They are still holding on with unbelievable hope to the things that they have held onto for years, which they know are not working. Jesus has told us that he is the "Bread for the Journey." We hunger and thirst after righteousness, and only when we feed upon this bread are we filled.

It is an enticing idea that we cannot be filled if we are alone. We cannot be filled unless we share the bread.

I was talking with Sheila about fairy tales, and I had not intended to include a fairy tale, but I am going to. There is a story, and it is really a Christmas story from Russia about some children who went out in the forest every year, and every year at Christmas-time there were toys hanging all over the trees in the forest. And there was only one stipulation that was given to the children. It was this: They had to take the toys and give them to someone else. If they tried to keep them, they would disappear. As long as they gave them away, the toys were real. One Christmas a very intelligent and wise person came among them and convinced all of the children that this was a lie, this was not true. As a matter of fact, and if you went out and collected these toys and kept them for yourself, they would be yours. And so the children went out into the forest, and went looking for the toys and lo and behold, there wasn't a toy to be had, except for one little boy, who had a sick sister at home, and he had gone out into the forest, not for himself, but for his little sister. And as he went into the park, he noticed that there were toys galore, and he collected all of the toys he could carry and came back with them, and the next morning gave them to his little sister, and he was the only one who had found toys.

And of course, the moral is that because he was unwilling to keep it all for himself, there had been a great deal to share. The bread for the journey is like that: If we try to keep it all for ourselves, we do not get fed, but if we share it there is enough to go around.

Someone, talking about the corridor, said that not only do we see the light at the end of the corridor, but we see each other by that light. We see each other's needs by that light. We see what the other person needs to fill him or herself, as well as seeing our own needs. And when we share the bread, all of us are fed.

Along the journey, we will have to feed other beggars like ourselves, who will be crying for alms, and we like the disciples, will constantly answer "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, I give unto you," and we will share the feeding and the healing,

helping them to walk the journey. We will become "Shalom-sharers," bringers of peace. But we cannot do it just by doing the act. It is a funny thing, but always contained within the act, must be not only sharing the physical bread, caring for physical needs, but also we must be sharing the source. We cannot become so act-centered that we forget the word. Christianity is always a three-sided message. It is always a triangle. It is always the word, the Kerygma, the Greeks say, service -- the deed -- Diakonia, and community, Koinonia. The word, the act, and the community in which the word and the act take place. The word is always centered within the deed. We do the deed, because we believe the Word. We cannot sever the word from the deed. We cannot merely feed people real bread, because the manna -- no matter how spiritually we feel when we feed it -- can only leave them fed for the moment, and then leaves them unchanged unless we also give them the word. We must also feed the bread of heaven. Only then, will people's lives be turned around. Service is good preparation for the word, but it does not displace it.

The church in later years has been so concerned with the deed, with acts, that it has forgotten the word in which we are centered. The healing and the feeding were signs that there was One there who had power. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." He was making a statement that was world-shattering at his time. Every time he says, "I am," he is confronting those around him with the very name of God. "I am that whom I am." He shakes those around him with his claim of divinity. Christ is the bread from heaven -- we are not. We can only offer the bread. We must not claim to do in our own names, but only in the name of one who gave himself.

This church has been in a process of renewal. This church has been moving. And I have clearly heard a mandate from this church to become more Word-centered, more centered in the Gospel, more centered in a spiritual core. We ~~hard~~ it again today in Project Resurrection. And to me that is a very clear sense of direction on the part of this church that we cannot become so deed-centered that we lose our center in the word.

I have heard that over and over again for the last few weeks, and for me it comes as a very clear call that this is the direction which this church must take if it is going to grow, if it is to feed people, if it is going to be a church that all of us want it to be. I hear it and I answer it by saying to you, "I hold out to you that which is truly bread and not a stone, that which is the bread of life." The center of our Christian experience is still Jesus Christ, the person, the One whom we must follow down the corridor to the Light, and by that Light we will be enabled to see each other, and our needs, and be able to reach out in love and concern, and feed each other for the journey. This church is moving. It has taken us some time to get there, but I honestly believe, that if we go in the direction that people have very clearly told us is the way they want this church to go that there will be a resurrection and a renewal and an opening up of people's spiritual lives to the one direction the Christian church has, the direction offered us by Jesus Christ. Amen.

HYMN: "Lead On, O Cloud of Yahweh" (The journey is our home.)

Rev. Marge Ragona

This sermon is based on Word in Deed by Gabriel Fackre.

